Charter Schools and the Sunshine State: What Does the Research Tell Us?

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What Are Charter Schools?

Charter schools are public schools that are granted more autonomy than traditional public schools in exchange for meeting certain conditions outlined in a charter agreement; these schools have become a significant part of the American urban education landscape. Currently, more than 40 states have adopted laws promoting the development of charter schools. These laws have resulted in nearly three million students attending charter schools throughout the United States (Center for Education Reform, 2016). The charter school concept spread rapidly. In 1994, there were just 12 states with charter laws. By 2000, there were nearly 40 states, plus the District of Columbia. The overall percentage of students served by charter schools grew steadily. There are nearly 6,700 charter schools in existence nationwide and there are more than 365,000 students on charter school waiting lists. Of the approximately 6,700 charter schools that have opened across the United States, 1,036 have closed since 1992 (Center for Education Reform, 2015). Nationally, financial deficiencies are the most common cause of charter school closure, responsible for 42 percent of closures; these deficiencies are most often due to low student enrollment or funding issues. Mismanagement is the second most common cause, leading to 24 percent of all closures. Nearly 20 percent of closures occur because a school failed to meet acceptable student performance levels (Center for Education Reform, 2014).

Nationally, charter schools are concentrated in urban areas, which are home to approximately 53 percent of all charter schools (Gross et al., 2012). This concentration likely reflects both need and demand. Individuals are more likely to support the opening of charter schools in areas where student achievement is low and parents want more options. New Orleans and Washington, D.C. are the two U.S. districts with the highest charter school enrollment. More than 70 percent of students in New Orleans and almost 40 percent of students in Washington, D.C. are enrolled in charter schools and almost all the students enrolled in these charter schools are African-American. (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, 2014).

Florida, along with four other states – California, Arizona, Ohio and Texas – account for nearly 50 percent of charter schools in the United States. According to the Florida Department of Education Office of School Choice, there are currently 652 charter schools in operation in Florida, which represents approximately 16 percent of all public schools and 9 percent of the student population or 270, 301 students. The annual open rate in Florida is 10.5 percent per year (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016). During 2014-15, 97 percent of the state's charter public schools were start-ups and 3 percent were conversions (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, 2016).

The landscape of Florida's charter schools is quite diverse. Several districts in Florida have no charter schools, while the district with the highest number, namely Miami-Dade County Public Schools, had a total of 124 charter schools during the 2015-2016 school year. But not only does the charter school landscape differ from district to district, there are also a variety of differences across individual schools. There are both very large charter schools in Florida with more than 2000 students enrolled and small schools that by design only serve a few dozen children. There are charter schools operated by charter school management companies that operate dozens of schools nationwide and single schools operated by small groups of individuals. Like traditional public schools, Florida has charter schools for every grade level and most grade spans– from K-5 elementary schools to schools serving an adult population to schools that span grade levels from kindergarten through high school. Some charter schools, like the School of Arts and Science in Tallahassee, feature a family-model in which students are placed in multi-age classes.

There are charter schools serving the needs of specific populations, such as the Florida Autism School of Excellence in Tampa or schools focusing on drop-out prevention, bi-lingual students or students with developmental delays. Other charter schools have focused curricula, highlighting for example the arts or STEM fields, such as River City Science Academy in Jacksonville and Bok Academy in Lake Wales Charter Schools. Charter schools in Florida are also diverse in terms of their location– while a majority of charter schools are located in urban or suburban areas, others are situated in areas, some incorporating their surroundings in their curriculum. St. Cloud Preparatory Academy in St. Cloud and Learning Gate Community School in Lutz, both use the community features of their schools to engage their students in meaningful outdoor activities, including gardening and caring for animals.

Florida law allows local school boards, state universities (for lab schools only), and community college district boards of trustees (for charter technical career centers only) to serve as authorizers. While the state has essentially only a single authorizer option available (i.e. local school boards), there is a considerable amount of authorizing activity (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, 2016). There is an appeal process in place provided by Florida law. Applications denied by the school board may be appealed to the Charter School Appeal Commission, whose recommendation is then forwarded to the state board of education. The law provides that the state board of education can vote to require a sponsor to accept an application. The law requires any appeals involving proposals to replicate a high performing charter school be made directly to the state board of education and requires the authorizer to provide evidence that the application does not meet the requirements specified in law. The state board's final decision is binding.

Charters in Florida receive a waiver from most state rules and regulations governing traditional public schools. Specific statewide requirements, such as class size limitations, apply to charter schools. Virtual schools are allowed. Management contracts with educational service providers are not restricted, but there is a "model charter application form" that must be filled out and includes details on any agreement with a provider, including academic, operational, and financial data on the educational service provider. Teachers are exempt from district collective bargaining agreements. If a charter school is a public employer and not a private one, then teachers have the option to participate in the state's retirement system. Additionally, there is no statewide limit on the number of charter schools that may be approved.

Funds pass through the district. The law states that funding for charter schools follows the same formula used for all other public schools minus administrative fees retained by school boards. Administrative fees are five percent for all charters, or two percent for those charters considered "high-performing." If disputes arise over contracted services or contractual matters, the law allows appeals to the state charter school appeals commission. The law does not allow authorizers to charge additional fees or surcharges for administrative and educational services beyond five percent.

The Charter School Concept

In their review of the charter school concept in Michigan, Miron and Nelson (2002) outlined the essential components of the charter concept. Figure 1 presents an adaptation of their model. The left panel includes three structural changes-choice, accountability and deregulation—meant to increase school autonomy; these changes do not stipulate detailed charter school actions, but rather create an "opportunity space" in which charter schools can operate (Miron & Nelson, 2002, p. 4). In the first, the charter school system allows parents greater *choice* in their children's education, which supporters argue will improve education via competition since funding moves with students; charter schools that fail to attract and retain students will be closed. Choice also involves a sorting process whereby parents choose the best mix of educational services for their children, which allows each school to focus on a set of educational preferences (Miron & Nelson, 2002). The second is a new form of *accountability* in which charter schools must achieve certain outcomes as specified in their charters or risk being closed (Gawlik, 2012; Fuller 2000; Miron & Nelson 2002). The third, *deregulation*, allows charter school leaders to choose which methods they will employ to meet these goals (Miron & Nelson 2002). The bargain struck between policymakers and charter school advocates is that charter schools will be allowed to deregulate in exchange for increased accountability. This deregulation allows charter schools to design their own curricula, choose textbooks and negotiate teacher contracts as they see fit.

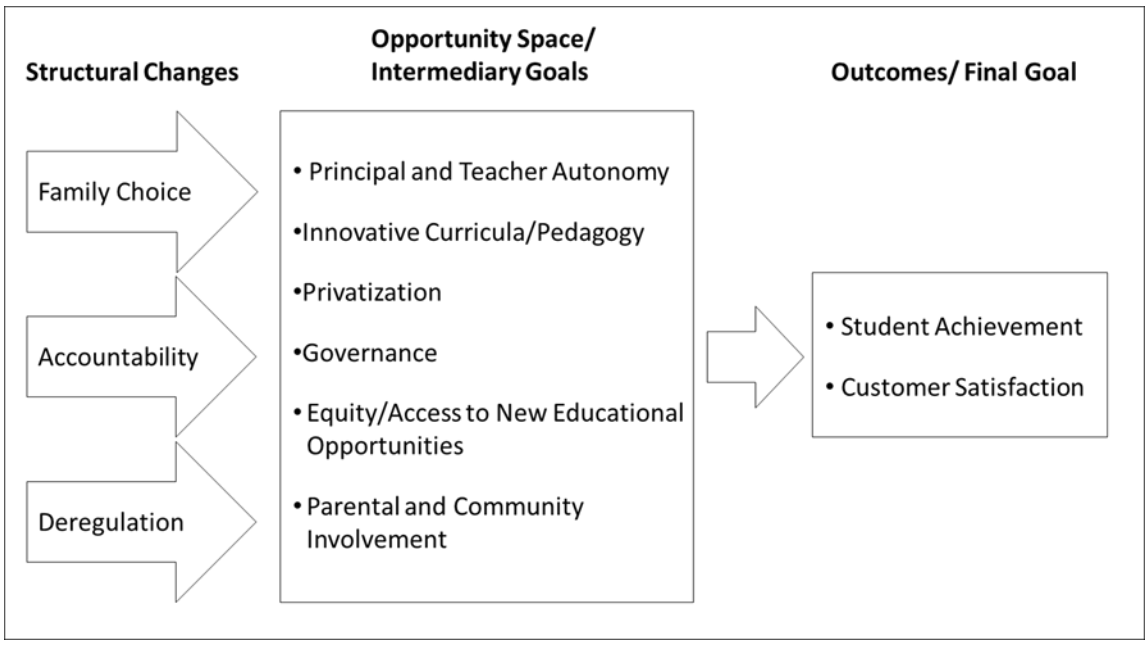

Figure 1. Charter School Concept (Adapted from Miron & Nelson, 2002).

The central panel of Figure 1 lists intermediate goals that delimit the opportunity space in which charter schools can experiment; charter school laws often define such intermediate goals in an attempt to encourage charter schools to use their autonomy in certain ways (Miron and Nelson, 2002). These goals include greater autonomy for principals and teachers, innovative curriculum and pedagogy, increased privatization of services (e.g., food service, nursing care), innovation in school governance, increased equity or access to new educational opportunities and greater parental and community involvement.

The right panel of Figure 1 includes the two most common outcomes that serve as final goals within the charter concept: student achievement and customer satisfaction (however, there is significant controversy about which outcomes charter schools should be required to meet) (Miron & Nelson, 2002). Many charter school state laws include a focus on raising student achievement, and authorizers often use test scores for accountability purposes (Wohlstetter et al., 2013). With regard to customer satisfaction, some school choice scholars have argued that in an open market system, the best indicator of a school's quality (and thus an important final goal of charter schools) is its ability to attract, satisfy, and retain customers (i.e., parents) (Miron & Nelson, 2002).

In this research brief, we review the literature on charter schools using Miron and Nelson's conceptual framework of the charter school model. This purpose of this paper is to examine the state of charter schools against these various intermediary and final goals including authorization and outline other important aspects of the charter school concept. The paper draws mostly on literature from education and several specific areas including segregation, innovation and autonomy. First, we review the research on charter school outcomes, focusing on student achievement. Then, we review critical aspects of the charter school concept

including the authorizing process. Finally, we discuss some implications of the extant research on charter schools for Florida and the US education system at large.

Charter Schools: Student Achievement and Customer Satisfaction

Student Achievement. While researchers have conducted many studies of student achievement in charter schools over the past 20 years, this research is of varying quality (Berends, 2015). However, as explained by Betts and Hill (2010), this research has improved over the past decade for two reasons: the growing prevalence of value-added analyses using longitudinal student data, and an increase in the number of charter schools holding lotteries for student selection, which allows researchers to employ a randomized design.

The question remains, have charter schools increased student achievement? The results are mixed with some studies finding minor positive effects and others finding no effects. Only a handful of studies have found larger effects. It depends on the data, location and methods employed (Berends, 2015). Some studies using lottery-based randomized designs have found that academic achievement gains are greater for students who attend charter schools than for those in traditional schools; however, these studies have largely used data from urban centers such as New York City and Boston (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; 2011; Angrist et al., 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; Hoxby et al., 2009). Hoxby et al. (2009), for example, conducted a longitudinal study of lottery-based charter schools in New York City and found that, relative to students in traditional schools, charter school students' third grade scores for mathematics and English were .14 and .13 standard deviation units higher, respectively. The authors concluded that, with regard to gains in mathematics performance, students who attended charter schools in New York City for a longer period of time (e.g., kindergarten through eighth grade) matched their peers in more affluent suburban schools. These gains led to an 86 percent reduction in the mathematics achievement gap and a 66 percent reduction in the English gap. A critique was provided of the method used for measuring students since it relied on a statistical model that makes it impossible to pinpoint how much of the improvements on tests can be attributed to charter schools (Reardon, 2009). Reardon pointed out that Hoxby et al. inappropriately extrapolated the effect of charter schools over time. Similarly, in an analysis of students who won and lost in the charter school lotteries in the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, Dobbie and Fryer (2011) found that in both math and English, the effects of charter elementary schools were large enough to close the achievement gap. Charter school students gained approximately .2 standard deviations per year in each subject.

Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2011) found large positive effects of charter schools in Boston. Middle-school students who won a charter school lottery outscored lottery losers who attended traditional public schools by .4 standard deviations in mathematics and .25 standard deviations in English. This effect size was large enough to reduce the black-white reading gap in middle school by two-thirds and eliminate the black-white mathematics gap.

Other studies using a lottery-based randomized design to analyze broader samples of schools have found more mixed effects of charter school enrollment on student achievement (Furgeson et al., 2012; Gleason et al., 2010). Gleason et al. (2010) examined 36 charter schools in 15 states and found no significant effects on mathematics and reading achievement. Furgeson et al.

(2012) employed lottery-based and quasi-experimental approaches to examine 22 charter management organizations (CMOs) and found no significant overall effects of charter school enrollment on student achievement in math. At the organizational level, 11 CMOs had significant positive effects, 7 had significant negative effects and 4 had no significant effects.

Researchers using quasi-experimental methods have found mixed results for the effect of charter schools on student achievement (Booker et al., 2007; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Hanushek et al., 2007; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Sass, 2006; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006; Zimmer et al., 2009, 2012). Studies of this type most commonly show that students in charter schools and those in traditional public schools perform at similar levels. For example, Zimmer et al. (2009, 2012) examined charter schools in seven states and found no statistically significant overall charter school effects.

The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University conducted two of the most important quasi-experimental charter school studies in 2009 and 2013. Each study compared the academic performance of students at charter schools and traditional public schools (CREDO, 2013). The results of the first study (published in 2009) were extremely controversial. The controversy centered on a number of aspects of the study including the methodology and the interpretation of the results.

The 2013 CREDO study included the 16 states that were part of the original study as well as 11 additional states (including Florida) (CREDO, 2013). The expansion of the sample states significantly improved the reliability of the findings and strengthened the credibility of the research. The 2013 study included three separate analyses. The first analysis highlighted trends in charter school performance since the 2009 study (CREDO, 2013) by examining data from the original 16 states to determine whether achievement among charter school students had improved in these schools since 2009 (CREDO, 2013). The second analysis also focused on the schools in the first cohort but excluded data for schools that had closed since 2009, allowing researchers to measure the overall performance of the schools as compared to their earlier measures (CREDO, 2013). The third analysis examined newly opened or newly tested schools that were not part of the original study, and thus shed light on systemic advances in the charter school concept that hypothesized to produce stronger schools (CREDO, 2013).

In general, findings from the 2013 study showed aggregate improvements in both math and reading results since 2009 in charter schools. Compared to traditional public schools, charter schools in the 27 focal states had slightly larger gains in reading and similar gains in math (CREDO, 2013). But these gains were so small they did not warrant significance. In the schools included in both the 2009 and the 2013 studies, students in several subgroups—Blacks, Hispanics, low SES students, English language learners (ELL), and special education students—all improved in both reading and math. Hispanic students performed well in reading, low SES students performed well in math and English language learners performed well in both reading and math. Because the new cohort of schools served a larger portion of students in poverty and Hispanic students (relative to the schools included in the 2009 study), these results were significant (CREDO, 2013). A clear limitation of the study (as noted in the report) was its focus on only one measure of a schools' effectiveness: state test scores.

In summary, the extant literature reveals a few key findings about the effects of charter schools on student achievement: Some studies, especially those conducted in urban areas where the need for school reform is arguably greatest, have found significant positive effects of charter schools albeit the methods employed are in question (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; 2011; Angrist et al., 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; Hoxby et al., 2009; Reardon, 2009). Charter schools have a wide range of effects on student achievement (Furgeson et al., 2012; Gleason et al., 2010; (Booker et al., 2007; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Hanushek et al., 2007; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Sass, 2006; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006; Zimmer et al., 2009, 2012). While some studies (such as the CREDO studies) find a positive but small effect of charter school achievement relative to traditional public schools, these are initial results and must be interpreted with caution (CREDO, 2013).

Customer Satisfaction. The charter school concept posits customer satisfaction as a final goal of the reform. Gauging customer or, in this case, parental satisfaction is critical at every juncture of the reform. While a few studies have examined parental satisfaction in charter school families, the research is sparse. Customer satisfaction in the context of these studies and the figure is taken to mean mainly parental satisfaction. Lacey et al. (2006) surveyed parents, students, teachers, administrators and auxiliary personnel in five charter schools in Miami-Dade County and Broward County, Florida; the researchers concluded that parents were most satisfied with administrative leadership, high expectations for students and school climate and least satisfied with school resources.

Solomon (2003) surveyed 11,777 parents in Arizona charter schools, asking about satisfaction with academic programs, teaching, facilities, discipline, and school mission. Parents were most satisfied with the school's academic program and teaching. The author also asked parents to grade their child's school using a traditional "A+" to "F" scale; 66.9 percent gave their child's school an "A+" or "A." Miron, Nelson and Risely (2002) found similar results in an evaluation of Pennsylvania's charter schools; most parents stated that they enrolled their children in a charter school because of good teachers and high-quality instruction. Overall, parents were very satisfied with their school's education program, but less satisfied with the school's facilities and financial stability.

Finally, Wohlstetter, Nayfack and Mora-Flores (2008) reported the results of a survey of potential stakeholder satisfaction for charter schools in Southern California. The findings show that, overall, parents reported positive levels of satisfaction with charter schools. In addition the study showed that parents, especially those whose children attend new charter schools, were only moderately satisfied with school facilities and the support services offered to students, but these concerns were addressed through school improvement efforts as charter schools aged.

Charter Schools: Autonomy, Innovation, Privatization and Equity

Have Charter Schools Increased Principal and Teacher Autonomy? Perhaps the most distinctive feature of charter schools compared to traditional public schools is the significant autonomy granted to principals and teachers. The assumption is that this increased autonomy will lead to

improved student achievement by allowing principals and teachers to adapt instruction to the particular needs of their students. Recent research sheds light on how much autonomy principals and teachers in charter schools have relative to the faculty in traditional schools and whether this autonomy has improved the performance of faculty members.

Gawlik (2008) found that a range of variables can affect the level of autonomy granted to charter school principals. Through an analysis of the nationally representative Schools and Staffing Survey (NCES, 1999), she identified two significant institutional barriers to perceived principal autonomy: state and district policies. In addition, the type of charter school—start-up versus conversion[1]—affects principal autonomy. Principals in start-up charter schools, but not in conversion charter schools, had more autonomy than traditional public schools. Finally, principal autonomy is linked to state laws concerning unionization and whether principals have hiring and firing rights (Adamowski, Therriault & Cavanna, 2007).

A second goal related to autonomy in charter schools is greater involvement of teachers in school decision-making processes, which was hypothesized to lead to greater commitment on the part of teachers. Researchers have compared charter school teachers and their counterparts in traditional schools with respect to decision-making authority over staffing, curriculum and the budget, all key components of increased autonomy. Malloy and Wohlstetter (2003), for example, interviewed 40 teachers in six urban charter elementary schools in California and found that in schools where the principal had created a "sense of team" (p. 235), teachers were more involved in decision making. This psychological belief translated into positive behavior because teachers consulted on grade-level teams to create school-wide initiatives, such as developing a program to boost family engagement (Wohlstetter et al., 2013).

A case study of four charter schools in California (two start-ups and two conversion schools) found that in the two start-up charter schools and in one of the conversion schools teachers reported that they experienced increased autonomy compared to previous employment experience in traditional public schools (Gawlik, 2007). However, teachers still experienced constraints: teachers from both of the conversion charter schools felt restricted by district oversight, especially with regard to accountability measures and all of the teachers felt constrained by state-level accountability measures. In addition, several teachers commented that they felt restricted by their CMO. At times, increased autonomy could prove to be problematic. Some of the teachers who reported having an adequate level of autonomy had difficulty knowing how to handle this autonomy in the classroom. The study concluded that the charter school system expanded teacher input in the areas of instructional activities, curricular innovation, hiring and evaluating faculty, and budget decisions.

Crawford (2001) also examined teacher autonomy in charter schools via a survey of nearly 400 teachers working in charter and non-charter schools in Colorado and Michigan. The author found that the difference in teacher perceptions of autonomy was negligible between the two types of schools. Through interviews and observations at a charter school serving sixth to twelfth grade, Margolis (2005) found that while teachers enjoyed greater autonomy and had increased decision-making authority in charter schools, they felt this autonomy was a burden

[1] A start-up charter school is a brand new school started from scratch while a conversion charter school is a pre-existing public or private school that has converted to a charter school.

and they reported being overwhelmed with both administrative and instructional duties. Finally, Marshall, Gibbs and Greene (2001) examined autonomy from the other side—the perceptions of teachers in traditional schools; the authors found that, in general, teachers and administrators at four non-charter elementary schools (n=140) desired more autonomy and believed that charter schools would allow teachers more independence than traditional schools.

Autonomy from rules and regulations is central to the charter school concept. The theory of action is that if leaders and teachers experience higher levels of autonomy and accountability is also increased, then charters will use their freedom to design programs in creative ways that will attract parents and students. But research to date does not provide information on 'how' school-level autonomy influences student achievement; these studies only indicate the degree to which autonomy is perceived to be exercised among teachers and leaders.

Have Charter Schools Produced Innovation in Curricula and Administration? Core to the theory of the charter concept is the argument that autonomy and accountability will produce innovations in curricula and administration that in turn will improve student outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Walberg & Bast, 2003).

Lubienski (2003) assessed three dimensions of innovation in charter schools: (1) whether the innovation is an educational change (a change in curricular content or instructional strategies with an impact at the classroom level) or an administrative change (an organizational-level change that impacts the structural operations of the school but does not affect the classroom); (2) the extent to which the practice is established and familiar or original or unique; and (3) whether the practice appears at the local, state, and national levels. Drawing from 56 reports of innovation in charter schools including state-level evaluations and other research reports that provide evidence regarding innovative practices, Lubienski (2003) found that organizational, administrative, and structural changes, such as merit-pay for teachers and smaller class size, were prominent in charter schools. In contrast, while Lubienski observed a few innovative classroom-level practices (e.g., the use of technology in instruction, individualized instruction), in general, practices referred to as charter "innovations" such as hands-on learning, cooperative learning, or a "back-to-basics" approach, were strategies that can and often do occur in traditional public schools.

Overall, Lubienski (2003, 2004) concluded that there is little evidence that charter schools have produced innovative instructional strategies, and that "although some organizational innovations are evident, classroom strategies tend toward the familiar" (p. 416). Some argue that, even America's most highly regarded charter schools are not very innovative. For example, KIPP (the Knowledge is Power Program), which emphasizes strict discipline, a college prep curriculum, and high expectations for students and teachers, strives to meet these high expectations via intensified instruction rather than novel instructional practices (Berends, 2015).

How has the Growth of Privatization Manifested Itself in Charter Schools? The most visible manifestation of privatization in charter schools is the increasingly visible role of private charter management organizations (CMOs) and education management organizations (EMOs) (Miron et al., 2010). CMOs (e.g., KIPP, YES Prep, Green Dot Schools and Aspire) are nonprofit organizations that operate like districts; these organizations typically manage multiple charter schools and establish new ones. EMOs are similar, but are for-profit organizations.

Another manifestation is contracting out management and operation of charter schools to a private vendor. Prior to 1999, contracting for education management was somewhat rare but has become increasingly common. Charter schools move beyond contracting out services simply for busing or food services, and provide full management and operations of schools. It is argued that EMOs may introduce more variation into school systems and encourage the founding of charter schools, thereby expanding choice. In theory, EMOs bring market forces into the governance of public schools (Hess, 2003). If they do not manage effectively, they could lose students, per pupil funding, and their contracts.

Supporters of EMOs offer reasons such as the following to augment their case: schools already hold many contracts for services such as busing and food preparation with private vendors; the profit motive and risk of losing contracts motivates

EMOs to perform well; the contracting agency can specify clear goals in the contract that allow for relatively straight-forward oversight; EMOs offer an alternative to problematic public bureaucracy; and EMOs can be innovative about management, curricula, and other aspects of education (Hess, 2003; Molnar, 2001). Among the arguments against EMOs are that it is not evident how EMOs can yield a profit and produce better results than public schools; contracting agencies do not necessarily write good contracts and there can be hidden costs; EMOs merely replace a public bureaucracy with a private one and add an additional layer because public oversight remains necessary; EMOs, especially private ones, are not as forthcoming with financial, academic, and other data as traditional public schools; instead of being innovative, EMOs often use packaged programs that the district could purchase directly; economy of scale influences EMOs to control many schools in similar fashion, limiting innovation; contracting out management of charter schools to distant EMOs runs counter to the original intent that they be locally controlled (Bulkley, 2004; Holloway, 2002, Ladd, 2002; Molnar, 2001).

Have Charter Schools Increased Equity/Access to New Educational Opportunities? Proponents of charter schools argue that charters can help alleviate the racial and economic segregation prevalent in the public education system. However, while charter schools might allow poor and minority students to attend schools that may be better choices for them, critics assert that charter schools actually reinforce segregation on the basis of income, race, ethnicity and other categories (Miron et al., 2010; Arsen, Plank & Sykes, 1999; Cobb & Glass, 1999; Horn & Miron, 2000) because charter schools tend to attract students defined racially or ethnically.

While all charter schools are to offer enrollment to any student seeking to enroll (Wohlstetter et al., 2013), some studies have maintained that charter schools are able to replicate inequalities via selection methods. Ausbrooks (2002) found that more than half of the 36 states with charter school laws at the time were “silent on the issue of geographic boundaries, and those that

include provisions include no guidance as to how boundaries may be established without discriminating against certain racial and socioeconomic groups." (p. 191) In addition, Ausbrooks found that in almost half of those states, laws did not address the issue of student transportation, creating a disadvantage for students without their own means of transportation, and nearly three quarters did not address information dissemination, permitting charter schools to market to specific neighborhoods or types of families (Wohlstetter et al., 2013). These legislative omissions—as well as charges that choice programs were shaped by the middle and upper-middle classes and marginalize low-income and minority families—have fueled claims that charter schools have led to increased segregation (Wohlstetter et al., 2013).

There has been a long-standing concern among education researchers and policy makers that public school choice may lead to increased racial isolation. Stein (2015) examined the sorting of students into charter schools in Indianpolis by tracking individual students from their charter school of enrollment back to the school they were enrolled in immediately prior to the switch to a charter school, allowing for a direct comparison of school racial demographics between the two sectors. She found evidence that the process of charter school choice leads to higher degrees of racial isolation and less diversity within schools than is present in the underlying process of student school transfers in the public school district from which a majority of these students come.

Using panel data for individual students, Bifulco and Ladd (2007) examined the effect of charter schools in North Carolina on racial segregation and black-white test score gaps. The authors found that North Carolina's system of charter schools has increased the racial isolation of both black and white students. The typical African American charter school student attended a school that was more than 70 percent African American, while his non-charter counterpart attended a school that was less than 50 percent African American. The analysis suggests that the disproportionate preferences of black and white charter school students (and their families) for schools of different racial compositions help to explain why there are so few racially balanced charter schools. In addition, Bifulco and Ladd (2007) found that in North Carolina, charter schools widened the black-white achievement gap; the relatively large negative effect of charter schools on the achievement of black students was driven by students who transferred into charter schools that were more racially isolated than the schools they left.

Renzulli (2006) examined how two factors—segregation at the school level within districts and charter school legislation—predicted black enrollment levels at local charter schools. Specifically, the study used the Schools and Staffing Survey Charter School Data 1999–2000 (NCES, 1999), Common Core of Data, and a unique data set of district test scores to estimate regression models of black enrollment in charter schools on district racial segregation and race provisions in charter school legislation. In addition, the presence of a racial clause in state charter school laws is associated with a higher percent of black students enrolled in charter schools. For example, New Jersey's law states: "The evaluation shall include, but not limited to, consideration of the following elements:…(5) the comparative demographics of student enrollments in school districts of residence and the charter schools located within those districts" (http://www.state.nj.us/njded/chartsch/cspa95.html). Florida's clause, similar to the New Jersey clause, is another example: "Such students shall be subject to a random lottery and to the racial/ethnic balance provisions which require a school to achieve racial/ethnic balance

reflective of the community it serves or within the racial/ethnic range of other public schools in the same school district (Fla. Stat. Ann. § 228.056). Findings suggest that the extent of racial segregation in a school district (in which white and black students are more unevenly distributed across schools) is positively correlated with the percentage of blacks enrolled in local charter schools. Segregation patterns also differed by region, with charter schools in the West, South, and Midwest enrolling higher percentages of white students than charter schools in the Northeast (Renzulli, 2006).

Garcia (2008) compared the racial composition of the district schools students exited to the charter schools they entered, and found that elementary and middle school students entered charter schools that were more racially segregated than the district schools they exited, while high school students entered charter schools with levels of racial segregation lower than or similar to the district schools they exited. Garcia also found that racial segregation patterns in charter schools are the result of white flight and black and Native American students self-segregating into charter schools that are more racially isolated than the district schools they exit. Several studies have found a link between parent preference and charter school segregation (Tedin & Weiher, 2004; Eckes, 2006; Ausbrooks, Barrett & Daniel, 2005); these studies have found that given a choice, the majority of parents send their children to schools with children and families from the same race.

In sum, there is some evidence that charter schools may systematically exacerbate patterns of racial segregation. The bulk of the research found greater segregation in charter schools than in other public schools and there is little evidence that charter schools are reducing students' isolation by race.

Role of Charter School Authorizers

The role of authorizers has been understudied and remains unclear. In the past few years there has been more research conducted looking at the role of authorizers, specifically the contributions of different types of authorizers and the role of authorizers on student achievement. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) argued that authorizers needed to take responsibility regarding their oversight functions, including closing down charter schools if they were not performing. In 2004, NACSA released their first edition of *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* which outlined lessons learned by more experienced authorizers regarding organizational capacity, application processes, performance contracting and oversight, evaluation and decisions associated with renewal. NACSA has used the *Principles and Standards* document as a way to document practices into principles and conducts an annual survey of authorizer practices every year.

Authorizer Types and Functions. Research conducted early on focused on identifying the different types of authorizers based on state law and the role they played. Palmer and Gau (2005) looked at the types of organizations that authorized charter schools according to state law and identified several types: state school boards; independent state charter boards; university or community colleges; city or mayor's offices; nonprofit organizations; or local, county or regional school boards. NACSA's latest national annual survey found that 90% of the over 1,000 active authorizers were local education agencies, 4.4% of authorizers were higher

education institutions and fewer than 2% fell in the 'other' authorizing categories (NACSA, 2013). More recent research on authorizer types has examined alternative authorizer types such as mayoral and university authorizers.

Authorizers play a key role in the life of a charter school. The application process is a mechanism for authorizers to screen and select charter school operators. They are responsible for overseeing and monitoring existing charter schools as well as holding them accountable for meeting performance goals and meeting the mission of their charters. Recently, states have given consideration to strengthening the authorizing role by requiring authorizers to apply to become charter school authorizers (Gustafson, 2013). Peer-to peer networks of authorizers have begun to take shape in Florida as well as in Michigan and Ohio. These networks pool resources to create some uniformity in authorizer practices.

Issues for Further Consideration and Research

The following section highlights issues that have been raised in the public discourse around the role of charter schools.

- **Innovation.** Charter school advocates often speak of the need to free teachers and principals from bureaucracy to discover innovative ways to teach and run schools. Some of the very first charter schools were started by groups of teachers who wanted to run their own schools, choose their own curriculum, and experiment with unorthodox schedules, staffing arrangements and instructional techniques.
- **Parents.** Charter proponents often cite the need to create new avenues for poor or disenfranchised families to have access to choice the same way wealthy families do. A common refrain among proponents is that public school choice is the "civil rights issue of our time."
- **Competition.** The architects of the Minnesota charter law were among the first to write about how charter schools would perform better than other public schools which, in turn, would have a ripple effect, putting pressure on traditional public schools and school districts to respond with innovations and improvements. Market-based economic theories are consistent with this logic and argue that by putting an end to the monopoly on tuition-free schools, we would see improvements in all schools.
- **Accountability.** Charter schools confront a two-tier accountability system. First, they are accountable to the authorizer. Authorizers are to oversee charter schools and are to ensure financial and organizational viability. In addition, charter schools must comply with state and federal regulations in health, safety, and civil rights. Moreover, because a charter school's success depends on parents and teachers choosing to be a part of it, advocates argue charter schools are more accountable for results than traditional public schools.

  There are also concerns raised about too little accountability. Many feared that charter schools would abuse their freedom from many state rules and regulations. Concerns were raised about financial mismanagement, religious affiliation, and academic failure. Nationally, 42 percent of all charter school closures are due to financial deficiencies, mainly driven by low

student enrollment or inequitable funding. This is followed by 24 percent of all closures being a result of mismanagement. Nearly 20 percent of all closures occur because a school failed to meet acceptable student performance levels. Of the approximately 6,700 charter schools that have ever opened across the United States, 1,036 have closed since 1992 (Center for Education Reform, 2015). Since charter schools can be approved by various entities, many worry of the consequence of public schools that do not answer directly to a locally elected body such as a school board. There is a presumed loss of community-based democracy.

- **Segregation by race or ethnicity or income.** Although charter laws were designed to ensure that schools were open to all students, concerns remain that low-income families may not have equal access to information or the means to apply. Since families would have to opt to be part of charter schools instead of assigned, there was concern that charter schools would have a segregating effect. This concern may be exacerbated by the mission or theme orientation of some charter schools. For example, schools that were Montessori, arts, or environmentally focused were, some argued, a way for upper-income families, predominantly white, to opt out of urban neighborhood schools. But ethnic schools and those specifically designed to serve black inner city students also arose. People feared that by allowing self-selection to occur, the long U.S. aspiration of acculturation of people from varying backgrounds, including immigrants, could be compromised.
- **Charter School Networks.** Perhaps the more unexpected development not anticipated at the onset of charter schools is that charter school networks have emerged as an integral part of today's charter school landscape. From a policy perspective, questions remain about the relationship between authorizers and CMOs: Should authorizers treat CMOs with a record of strong performance differently in their chartering applications, oversight, or renewal procedures? If the academic success identified in early studies of CMO performance is supported by additional research, then what is unique about these models, in terms of their organizational structure or education program? Why are they successful, and can these innovations be adapted to the district setting?
- **Autonomy.** Are charters actually utilizing autonomy to bring about change, or is autonomy something that is granted but not used? Exactly how does school-level autonomy—or its perception—influence student achievement? In addition, the relationship between autonomy and the growth of charter districts needs further exploration. A handful of states allow charter districts, and Florida is one of them. It allows groups to create a charter district from scratch as opposed to converting existing school district schools.
- **Effectiveness.** Future studies should tackle the "black box" of high-performing charter schooling to unravel what structures or attributes might contribute to effectiveness.

The central challenge for state and district policy makers is to balance the call for added accountability with honoring school-level autonomy. Policy makers draw upon various kinds of accountability mechanisms: bureaucratic, performance, and market. Overreliance on one kind of accountability may lead to unintended consequences. Focusing on performance measures alone may lead schools to narrow their curriculum, while depending on market mechanisms may encourage schools to devote time to improving marketing campaigns rather than school quality. Strong authorizing is key to quality. Strong public oversight is a powerful lever for

ensuring high-quality charter schools. Weak authorizing risks leading to poor performing charter schools. Professional standards and supports for oversight are essential.

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